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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 005836

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [BG](#)  
SUBJECT: NDI MISSION PROVIDES BLUNT ASSESSMENT OF  
PRE-ELECTION ENVIRONMENT

Classified By: Acting A/DCM Dundas McCullough; reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary and Introduction. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted a pre-election assessment of the political environment in Bangladesh from September 8 to 11. Its team was led by former Senator Tom Daschle and included former New Zealand Prime Minister and World Trade Organization founding director general Mike Moore and former Cambodian government minister Mu Sochua. The team met with government and political party leaders, representatives of civil society, the media, and the Election Commission. It presented its findings in a press conference on September 11.  
End Summary and Introduction.

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TOO MUCH JOY  
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¶2. (C) The team met with Awami League (AL) president Sheikh Hasina on the first day of their visit, and then held another meeting with an AL "technical team" led by Hasina's son, Sajib Wazed "Joy", AL Presidium member Kazi Zafarullah and AL MP Asaduzzaman Noor towards the end of the trip. During the first meeting, the delegation endured a long history of the Awami League and its travails under the current government. Sheikh Hasina reiterated that the 2001 election was stolen from her, but, according to NDI, she did not raise the issue of a possible boycott.

¶3. (C) The second meeting was held on September 10, after the AL's country-wide dawn-to-dusk strike had ended. The NDI team opened by asking what the AL hoped to gain from the strike. Rather than responding directly, Joy began a Powerpoint presentation focused solely on AL demands for changes in the electoral and caretaker government systems. Frustrated with the repetition of the AL's demands, Senator Daschle interrupted Joy by asking, "Is this going to take much longer?" Moore asked about AL responsibility for street violence, and asked how long they planned to follow these tactics. According to NDI, the AL team "sat in stunned silence" at the question. Daschle eventually cut the meeting short and left with the rest of the NDI delegation.

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...AND NO TARIK  
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¶4. (C) The delegation sought unsuccessfully for a meeting with the Prime Minister. Haris Chowdhury, the PM's political secretary, said that since the PM was unable to meet with all

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the pre-election assessment missions coming to Dhaka, she

felt it was not appropriate to appear selective. However, Tarik Rahman, the PM's son and senior joint secretary of the BNP, along with Chowdhury, agreed to meet with the delegation on September 10.

15. (C) While several senior government members attended the meeting, Tarik and Chowdhury did not turn up due to an "urgent, last minute meeting." Instead, the BNP was represented by two cabinet ministers and two former ambassadors, all of whom seemed well prepared and eager to appear reasonable. They told NDI that they did not agree with the Prime Minister's decision not to meet with the delegation. Most of the discussion dealt with problems with the electoral list, which the BNP representatives insisted was actually less of an issue than in previous elections. When the delegation raised the issue of violence, the BNP ministers present said they "realize that there is a problem with the police." (In an earlier conversation with the delegation, Foreign Minister Morshed Khan told Moore and Sochua the police were "out of control.")

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AN UNRESPONSIVE CEC  
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16. (C) The delegation and Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) MA Aziz and the three other election commissioners discussed technical aspects of the election, with a particular focus on the voter list. When the delegation asked Aziz if he was concerned that an astounding two-thirds of the population seemed to be eligible to vote, Aziz did not respond. He repeatedly denied that he had any reason to be concerned about the voter list, the technical preparations for the elections, the clamor for electoral reform, or demands that he resign. Moore urged Aziz to do more to address the perception of incompetence, and to reach out to the parties represented in Parliament. Aziz sat in silence and did not

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react.

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BLUNT BUT BALANCED RECOMMENDATIONS  
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17. (SBU) In a press conference on September 11 that received wide media coverage, Senator Daschle presented the assessment mission's findings. He emphasized that while Bangladesh had held three successful prior elections, their meetings convinced them that no one should be "complacent about the future of genuine democracy in Bangladesh." In a criticism of the AL's boycott threat he stated that while the delegation believed that legitimate questions about the electoral process needed to be investigated and addressed, "the election process cannot be held hostage by the intransigent positions held by either the government or any political party." Daschle also added that the battle between the two largest political parties appeared to be estranging them from the people. He called for dialogue between the two leaders, and the creation of a post-electoral mechanism to foster reconciliation between the two parties. "The fault lines are complex and appear intractable," said Daschle, "but both leaders have an obligation to put their country ahead of their personal ambitions and animosities."

18. (SBU) The two most specific recommendations centered on the caretaker government (CTG) and the CEC. Regarding the AL's insistence that former Chief Justice KM Hassan not take over as the chief caretaker advisor, the team disagreed, saying that that while the opposition's complaints about process were legitimate, past service in a political party was not sufficient grounds to disqualify a candidate for the position and that the credentials of a candidate should be viewed in their entirety. They recommended, however, that the additional advisors to support the chief advisor be selected through a process of consultation with the major

parties.

¶9. (SBU) The team reserved its greatest concern for the CEC and the electoral process. They said that they were "alarmed" by the lack of confidence in the Election Commission and specifically the CEC, and were frustrated by how dismissive the CEC was of the complaints against the Commission and himself. "In the absence of a strong, corrective and urgent response, confidence in the Election Commission will continue to deteriorate to the point that he should not continue his duties," said Daschle. They also called for urgent efforts to improve the voter list, ensure minority and women access to the polls, and create mechanisms to prevent electoral violence. In closing, Moore emphasized that it was not too late to fix these problems, but the Bangladeshis needed to act quickly.

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COMMENT  
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¶10. (C) Both the ruling and opposition parties have reason to be unhappy with NDI's report, but on the core issue of whether Justice Hassan's BNP links years ago should disqualify him for the post of chief caretaker advisor, the AL received a stinging rebuke. NDI's blunt but balanced recommendations generated broad public comment and set the bar high for other assessment teams to demonstrate comparable insight and impact. Local media are dogging the European Commission assessment team now in Dhaka in hope of similar newsworthiness, but that team's mandate is limited to assessing and making private recommendations to the EU External Affairs Commissioner regarding the election monitoring climate in Bangladesh. END COMMENT  
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